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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000559

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SHIFTING FOCUS FROM POST-CRISIS TO  
POLITICS AS USUAL

REF: A. COLOMBO 0532

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 0487

[1](#)C. COLOMBO 0458

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Several recent events indicate that the domestic political scene may be gearing down from the post-tsunami crisis mode of the last three months--in which more blatant displays of self-interest and short-sightedness had to be held in check--back to politics as usual. Examples include delays on a mechanism to facilitate cooperation on tsunami relief with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); President Chandrika Kumaratunga's toleration (if not downright encouragement) of personal rivalries within her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party; and her resuscitation of the question of a popular referendum on the term-limited executive presidency. Although we are hopeful that the President will agree to the joint mechanism soon (septel), other signs suggest Kumaratunga may be calculating that post-tsunami sympathy and funding give her leeway to pursue her political ambitions. End summary.

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POST-MOURNING POLITICS

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[1](#)2. (C) As the end of the traditional three-month mourning period draws near, it appears that Sri Lankan politics may be reverting from its brief post-disaster moratorium on intriguing, backbiting and partisan plotting back to form. In particular, President Chandrika Kumaratunga seems to be shifting focus from post-disaster crisis mode to politics as usual, allowing her personal political imperatives to compete with issues of national importance, like the peace process and the delivery of tsunami assistance. Recent examples include:

--her bombshell reference in a March 7 speech to a possible referendum on devolution of power to the north and east. This was followed by local press reports on March 14, citing unidentified party sources, of a planned May referendum on devolution and the abolition of the executive presidency;

--her apparent tolerance (if not outright encouragement) of infighting within her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Possible moves to sideline two of the most powerful and popular members of the SLFP, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera, have the rest of the hierarchy scrambling to reconfigure alliances and secure positions.

--her protracted deliberations over a joint mechanism with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to facilitate the delivery of tsunami aid in Tiger-controlled areas. Some valid Government concerns are delaying the agreement, and she has assured the Ambassador that, once those are satisfied, she is ready to sign (septel). Nonetheless, the lengthy delay, coupled with increased violence in the north and east (Ref A), has many observers wondering whether the Government is ready to take advantage of the political space provided by the tsunami to re-engage with the LTTE.

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DEVOLUTION ANNOUNCEMENT:  
A DIVERSIONARY TACTIC?

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[1](#)3. (C) Since the President's unexpected reference to a possible referendum on devolution (which she asserted would pass with 80 percent of the popular vote), there has been no further official notification from the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) of any preparations for such a vote. (The Election Commission denied to us local press reports that it had been directed to prepare for a referendum.) Subsequent press reports of an omnibus referendum on a number of possible constitutional amendments--devolution, abolition of the executive presidency in favor of an executive prime

ministership, and changes to the electoral system--appear equally unfounded. That most key players, including ultra-nationalist coalition partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the LTTE, have not offered a detailed response to the President's statement suggests that few are taking the suggestion seriously.

14. (C) Some observers are interpreting the allusion to a referendum as a trial balloon. Before the tsunami, the President was said to be actively considering a referendum on abolishing the executive presidency that would allow her to stay in power as Prime Minister past the mandated two-term Presidential limit, and no one believes she has given up the idea since. Resurrecting discussion of a referendum now--albeit one on which her political self-interest is less blatant--may be a way of signaling that the idea, while temporarily on the back burner, is still cooking. Others see it as another example of Kumaratunga's tendency to let impulse dominate her extemporaneous speech without adequately thinking through the implications of what she says. Still others offer a less charitable construction: that the President invoked devolution to deflect growing criticism at the lack of progress on the peace front and/or delays in the delivery of tsunami aid.

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NO HEIR APPARENT  
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15. (C) Any sign that the President is once more considering a referendum--and thus postponing the need to choose a successor--exacerbates rivalries within the SLFP. (Her tendency to micro-manage, her unwillingness to delegate decision-making authority and her penchant for secretiveness are also aggravating factors.) So far, the President has not indicated any heir apparent. Affable, popular and politically savvy, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse is widely considered the obvious choice, but the President's exclusion of him from anything other than ceremonial functions has garnered him little practical experience in policy-making and left him only limited patronage to dispense. Moreover, despite (or perhaps because of) his strong southern base, Rajapakse has seen her circumscribe his influence on tsunami reconstruction to his home district of Hambantota (Ref B). Tourism Minister and older brother Anura Bandaranaike may have the lineage, but his party-switching past, his emotional instability and his reputed poor health make him politically unreliable. (The President's assertion in her March 7 speech that there are "lunatics" in every family did little to boost his position.) Meanwhile, rising star and Media Minister Managala Samaraweera, whose closeness to Kumaratunga predates her rise to power in 1994, seems to be in eclipse for now, in part because of his closeness to the perpetually troublesome JVP and her dissatisfaction with recent coverage in the state-owned media.

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JOINT MECHANISM:  
NOT YET IN FIRST GEAR  
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16. (C) Initial optimism ran high that the need for the LTTE and the GSL to work together on tsunami could help re-energize the peace process. Since then, protracted delays on the GSL side (although for valid concerns), along with a string of killings in the north and east, are dampening that enthusiasm. While we understand the GSL's need to consider implications of the agreement carefully, the reasons for the continued delay are less clear to the general public, especially since JVP opposition to a joint mechanism is far less vociferous than to a full-blown interim administration. The President's announcement of a special commission to investigate the February 7 killing of the LTTE's political wing leader for Batticaloa (Ref C) has done little to assuage widely held suspicions within the Tamil community of GSL involvement in the slaying. Tamil interlocutors (both pro- and anti-LTTE) have long expressed skepticism that the Sinhalese south, made complacent by the ceasefire, is serious about pursuing a permanent negotiated solution. These contacts now fear that the GSL may use the disaster as yet another pretext to defer politically difficult decisions on the peace front.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) Post-tsunami goodwill and sympathy have undeniably helped Kumaratunga politically. She runs the risk, however, of overestimating how long that goodwill may last if she allows her personal political ambitions to dominate the agenda. We are encouraged to learn that she hopes to sign the joint mechanism agreement soon (septel). That step will send an important and much-needed signal that she is willing to make the politically risky decisions necessary to expedite reconstruction and to re-energize the peace process.

LUNSTEAD